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# Refighting the Wars of Religion

*George Weigel*

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SINCE THE RISE of the religious New Right two generations ago, the religion-and-politics battle in America has been fought on many fronts. The most obvious one involves electoral politics, although even here the story is not so straightforward as often depicted. As Richard John Neuhaus showed two decades ago, the new activism of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants in the 1970's did not begin as a political offensive intended to woo America from secular liberalism, let alone from the Democratic party. Instead it was a defensive reaction to attempts by the Carter administration to bring federal regulatory pressure to bear on religious schools, thereby threatening to inundate the enclaves that evangelicals and fundamentalists had created to escape the cultural meltdown of the 1960's.\* Only in time did what started as self-defense—"leave us alone"—become a significant political movement promoting traditional morality in public life.

Viewed through a wider historical lens, the revolt of the evangelicals can also be seen as one episode in an ongoing struggle over the meaning of the religion clause of the First Amendment. For the first century and a half of the Republic, that clause had been a backwater of constitutional jurisprudence. This began to change with a series of Supreme Court decisions springing from the *Ever-*

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son case in 1947. What struck many as an effort to drive confessional religion from the public square and to establish secularism as a quasi-official national creed provoked a challenge by religious intellectuals and activists representing a wide variety of theological and denominational positions; their arguments were buttressed by legal scholars, some of them devoutly secular in cast of mind.

Nor is that all. If the religion-and-politics wars have been about politics—including the politics of constitutional interpretation—they have also been about ideas. To claim a place for religious conviction in the public square is implicitly to challenge the “secularization hypothesis” propounded for decades by modern sociologists and historians—the idea, that is, that modernization *inevitably* leads to a dramatic decline in religious conviction and a weakening of the culture-forming effects of religion. Perhaps less obviously, it is also to challenge the secularist or Jacobin version of the Whig theory of history, according to which the evolution of Western democracy should be seen as a development away from religion, and against Christianity in particular.

All of these disparate strands have been involved in the latest phase of the religion-and-politics wars: the rise of what Christopher Hitchens has hailed as the “new atheism.” The commercial success of Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great*, following on the heels

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\* “What the Fundamentalists Want,” COMMENTARY, May 1985.

of similar books by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*), and Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*), may not have added very much to the sum total of our knowledge about either religion or the impact of religious conviction on our politics. But these best-sellers have kept both the polemical and the political pots boiling, and sharpened the question of what role—if any—religious conviction, or even religiously-informed moral argument, should play in American public life.

Now, into the fray, comes Mark Lilla, formerly of the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, currently a professor of humanities at Columbia University. Lilla's *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*\* was considered newsworthy enough to be given a late-August rollout via a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, and was quickly claimed by Hitchens (albeit with caveats) for the new-atheist camp. But Lilla's mind and style are of an entirely different caliber from the likes of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. His book is marked by impressive learning, as well as by a gift for translating some of the more stylistically-challenged philosophers (Hobbes, Kant, Hegel) into language accessible to the non-specialist.

This is not to say, however, that *The Stillborn God* is without flaws; quite the contrary. Indeed, the net effect of Lilla's effort at nuanced and sophisticated analysis, as Hitchens no doubt perceived, is to render aid and comfort to the more bellicose alarms of the new atheists. Nor could this have been lost on the editors of the *New York Times Magazine*, their gimlet eyes turned to the 2008 elections.

All the more reason, then, to welcome the publication of still another new book, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, by the French historian of ideas Rémi Brague.† Traversing much of the same terrain as Lilla, Brague reaches dramatically different conclusions. He thus presents a serious challenge to Lilla's thesis, not to mention that of the new atheists and their cheerleaders. But let us take this in parts.

IN THE 17TH century, Lilla argues, "a Great Separation took place, severing Western political philosophy decisively from cosmology and theology. It remains the most distinctive feature of the modern West to this day." Lilla applauds this Great Separation, precisely because it removed what he calls "political theology"—defined as "discourse about political authority based on a revealed divine nexus"—from the discussion of human governance.

In Lilla's account, the evolution of relations between champions of divine authority and "secular" authorities, never exactly easy, had taken many a twist and turn even before the end of the Middle Ages. But in the 16th century, this ongoing tension would intersect fatally with a fierce battle among Western Christians themselves. The result was the European wars of religion, which more or less derailed the advance of European civilization for the better part of a century. Yet, on Lilla's reading, the bloodletting did have one positive consequence. By demonstrating the baleful real-world effects of "divinely revealed" ideas of governance, the European wars of religion triggered the Great Separation.

This severance was first effected intellectually by the English thinker Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Lilla is an unabashed if not uncritical admirer of Hobbes. That in itself is something of a feat, for Hobbes is rather easy to dislike, what with his draconian view of the fear-driven human person and his preference for absolutism in politics (because only an all-powerful tyrant can control a society composed of fear-driven individuals). But Lilla tries to disentangle Hobbes's taste for the leviathan state from what he believes to be Hobbes's critical intellectual breakthrough. As he put it in his *Times Magazine* article:

Hobbes planted a seed, a thought that it might be possible to build legitimate political institutions without grounding them on divine revelation. He knew it was impossible to refute belief in divine revelation; the most one can hope for is to cast suspicion on prophets claiming to speak about politics in God's name. This new political thinking would no longer concern itself with God's politics; it would concentrate on men as believers in God and try to keep them from harming one another. It would set its sights lower than Christian political theology had, but secure what mattered most, which was peace.

If Hobbes thus created modern political philosophy, it was John Locke (1632-1704) who, Lilla argues, in effect "humanized" and sold this new product. Locke agreed with Hobbes on the necessity of changing the subject of politics from God to man. But he had a less dyspeptic view of the human condition, and he did not much like the idea of tyranny. So, Lilla writes, he

began to imagine a new kind of political order in which power would be limited, divided, and

\* Knopf, 336 pp., \$26.00.

† Chicago, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, 365 pp., \$35.00.

widely shared; in which those in power at one moment would relinquish it peacefully at another, without fear of retribution; in which public law would govern relations among citizens and institutions; in which many different religions would be allowed to flourish, free from state interference; and in which individuals would have inalienable rights to protect them from government and their fellows.

This “liberal-democratic order,” Lilla continues, is “the only one we in the West recognize as legitimate today.” And thus we in the West are the political heirs of the “good” Hobbes: the Hobbes who, by demolishing “the Christian conception of man” and by completing “the most devastating attack on Christian political theology ever undertaken,” enabled post-Hobbesian moderns to “escape” from their intellectually barren, socially disruptive, and ultimately lethal theological patrimony. With help from the kinder, gentler John Locke, Hobbes made possible democracy, the rule of law, the constitutional defense of human rights, *and* religious freedom.

OF COURSE, as Lilla stipulates, all did not continue to go smoothly. Although Hobbes’s historic changing-of-the-subject might have been expected to settle matters, the French romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) intervened to set in motion what became a nasty intellectual mess. Rousseau shared Hobbes’s caustic criticism of clerical ignorance and theocratic authoritarianism; but, Lilla notes, he was also a “friend of religion.” And thus, rather than bracketing the human religious impulse when the subject turned to public life and politics, he insisted, in his romantic way, on honoring it. Even more consequentially, Rousseau identified this seemingly ineradicable impulse with an “inner light” that shapes our moral intuitions, including our moral intuitions about society, our obligations to others, our philanthropy, and indeed every other aspect of our lives as citizens.

True, Rousseau conceded, some religion was bad. But that was “priestly” religion (read: Catholicism), and it could be controlled and contained. Meanwhile, as the Savoyard vicar puts it in Rousseau’s *Emile* (a novel that Lilla explicates at some length): “I believe all particular religions are good when one serves God usefully in them.”

And so the religious camel’s nose was, once again, under the flap of the political tent. Both Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) followed Rousseau rather than Hobbes. The former, while attempting

to salvage universal and rationally defensible principles of morality by appeals to a “categorical imperative,” also argued for a kind of universalized Protestantism as the apex of human religious development. The latter took an even more dangerous turn by promoting religious conviction as the vital core of any authentic *Volksgeist* (national spirit or “idea”). Where *that* could lead was demonstrated when the liberal Protestant theology of the 19th-century German academy so thoroughly identified itself with the Wilhelmine *Volksgeist* that it vigorously defended German aggression in World War I and, almost until the very end, the slaughter in the trenches: a civilizational catastrophe far worse than, if weirdly reminiscent of, the earlier wars of religion.

Nor was that the end of it, as Lilla does not fail to point out. The liberal Protestant cave-in to Prussian militarism and German nationalism in turn triggered a messianic or apocalyptic reaction among religious thinkers in the interwar period—a period deeply marked, Lilla reminds us, by a thoroughgoing disgust with modernity and a new quest for authenticity among many European intellectuals. Some, like the Jewish thinkers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, and the Christian theologians Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pulled up on the reins before they came to the political brink. But others soon found a vessel for their fantasies in the man whom Winston Churchill once described as “a maniac of ferocious genius, the repository and expression of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human breast—Corporal Hitler.”

This whole sorry history, Lilla concludes, “served to confirm Hobbes’s iron law: messianic theology eventually breeds messianic politics.” The Great Separation, to which we owe our very lives as the beneficiaries of liberal democracy, can never be taken for granted; and neither can the liberal-democratic order itself. Lilla formulates the task before us in terms different from those proposed by the new atheists but tacitly in tune with their agenda:

Rousseau was on to something: we seem to be theotropic creatures, yearning to connect our mundane lives, in some way, to the beyond. That urge can be suppressed, new habits learned, but the challenge of political theology will never fully disappear as long as the urge to connect survives.

So we are heirs to the Great Separation only if we wish to be, if we make a conscious effort to separate basic principles of political legiti-

macy from divine revelation. . . . This means vigilance, but even more it means self-awareness. We must never forget that there was nothing inevitable about our Great Separation, that it was and remains an experiment.

THUS, MARK LILLA'S critique of political theology and definition of a political philosophy capable of sustaining liberal democracy. In *The Law of God*, Rémi Brague, a scholar of Plato, Aristotle, and medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy who divides his time between the Sorbonne and the University of Munich, agrees with Lilla to this extent: contemporary thinking on religion and politics is "dominated" by "one of the grand narratives in which modernity tries to explain itself: an escape of the political from the domain of theology." This master narrative, in turn, contains several sub-plots: "the secularization of a world supposed to have been 'enchanted'; the laicization of a supposedly clerical society; the separation of church and state, supposed to have been originally one."

But none of this, Brague argues, holds up under close examination. The "divine right of kings" had "barely been formulated before the 17th century," and is thus a modern and not a medieval idea. The "laicization" of politics, which is another way of describing what Lilla calls the Great Separation, masks a conceptual confusion, for "lay" is not a secular but a Christian notion, indeed a liberal notion, originally meant to describe man as possessed of a dignity that makes him capable of citizenship. As for the term "secularization," it "hints at what it is supposed to explain, namely, that there exists something like a 'secular' domain distinct from the religious domain."

Brague hardly denies that there have been, are, and always will be "disturbing" issues involved in "the divine's claim to strike the field of the political with full force." But rather than approach those issues by means of a quarantine—preemptively refusing theology any encounter with political thinking—Brague prefers to speak (a little awkwardly) of a "theoi-political" problem: the problem of the intersection of the divine, however construed, with our ideas about the right ordering of society. That problem is an enduring feature of the human condition, and one that has been extensively addressed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam over the past three millennia or more.

There is no room here to do justice to the intellectual richness of Brague's narrative, or to honor the breadth of his research. His survey of classical, biblical, Christian, talmudic, Byzantine, and Islamic efforts to deal with the "theoi-political problem"

occupies several engaging chapters. In the course of these, Brague introduces us to the natural-law tradition that Christianity borrowed from the Greeks: a way of thinking and arguing based on rational moral analysis that, at its best, can serve as a kind of general public grammar and vocabulary through which peoples of diverse religious convictions (and no religious convictions) can debate how we ought to live together. He also illustrates some of the deep theological and philosophical reasons, among them the lack of such a tradition, why Muslims have had difficulty finding Islamic warrants for what we would now call "pluralism" and "civil society." In his discussion of the High Middle Ages, Brague adduces both important Jewish thinkers (Yehuda Halevi and Maimonides) and a Christian approach to the religion-and-politics question stressing that law, even divine law, must be both rational and intelligible.

Brague's paladin here is Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, the divine law cannot be understood as something utterly external to man and to the human experience; nor is divine law to be construed primarily as a matter of a restraint on human freedom. To the contrary, as Brague writes, "Thomas considers the law [including revealed law] to be a gift of God to a rational and free creature. . . . [Law is] the way we act when in full possession of our freedom." Nothing in Aquinas, Brague insists, supports the "divine right of kings," for kings, too, are subject to a divine law aimed at "liberating reason and permitting it to be itself."

Thus in Aquinas—and in sharp contrast to that other Thomas, Hobbes—there is no zero-sum game between God and man, between revelation and reason, between faith and politics. Moreover, Aquinas's concept of law and human freedom challenges subsequent late-medieval philosophers who emphasized the centrality of will—God's will, and our own—in understanding the moral life. Two of those philosophers, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, as if anticipating modern legal positivism and the post-modern apotheosis of the autonomous self, turned Aquinas inside out and upside down; in their work, "the divine law was understood above all as the expression of the will of God imposed on things already created, and no longer as the impression of divine wisdom on the very nature of the created." Substitute "the leviathan state" for "God" in this formula, and suddenly Hobbes looks less like a brilliantly innovative thinker responding to the awfulness of the European wars of religion and more like the heir of an unfortunate tendency in one stream of Christian thought.

LIKE MARK LILLA, Rémi Brague is concerned about the fragility of our present political arrangements, about the protection of basic human rights, and about the future of the rule of law, democratically deliberated. But he will not concede that an effective defense of the Western democratic project requires the canonization of Thomas Hobbes and his Great Separation. Indeed, he points out that we might well wonder “whether that separation, which has received so much praise, . . . ever actually took place,” if for no other reason than that the “two institutions . . . never formed a unit.” Brague writes:

The political and the religious are two independent sources of authority; they have crossed one another’s paths more than once, but they never have merged in spite of efforts to fit them together, sometimes to the advantage of one, sometimes to that of the other. Although there has been cooperation between the two, there has never been confusion about which is which.

And if Brague parts company with Lilla on historical grounds, he also parts company on theological and anthropological grounds. Lilla and Brague have very different ideas of God and His revelation, and very different ideas of us; and in each case, the ideas are inextricably intertwined. Lilla urges unending vigilance in public life against the religious fevers that still inflame and infect our minds. Brague, at the end of *The Law of God*, suggests the conditions for a more modest approach to the “theoi-political problem”:

In the Bible and in Christianity . . . the presence of the divine does not comport an immediate demand for obedience. . . . The divine shows itself, or rather gives itself, before asking anything of us and *instead* of asking. . . . Although God does indeed *expect* something of his creatures (that we develop according to our own logic), He does not, in fact, *demand* anything, or rather, He asks nothing more than His gift already asks, thanks to the simple fact that it is given: [namely,] to be received. In the case of man, that reception does not require anything but humanity.

In *The Stillborn God*, Mark Lilla asks many of the right questions about religious experience and its effect on public life. His demolition of the fatuities of 19th-century liberal Protestantism (admittedly a fat target) is masterful. And he raises an appropriate caution-flag to the more exuberant secularists, like Christopher Hitchens, when he writes that the

story of political theology “is the transcript of an argument conducted over four centuries by serious men who understood what was at stake in their quarrel and offered reasons for their positions.”

Yet reading Lilla in tandem with Rémi Brague suggests forcefully just how much of that “transcript” has been left out of or underplayed in Lilla’s own account. Among the historical and philosophical sins of omission and commission highlighted by Brague’s telling of the tale are Lilla’s insistence that “Christian political theology” inevitably leads to tyranny and despotism; his false picture of medieval Christendom, which completely bypasses the rich social pluralism of the Middle Ages; his failure to grasp how the Catholic Church’s successful insistence on the freedom to order its internal life according to its own criteria (as, for example, in the famous “investiture controversy” that pitted Pope Gregory VII against the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV) created essential historical conditions for the possibility of such pluralism; and his misplaced insistence on the wars of religion as having been exclusively theological, whereas they in fact had a lot to do with political ambitions, economic interests, and the bloody birth-pains attendant on the emergence of the modern nation-state.

By widening the historical lens, Brague also reminds us that the Western accomplishment of distinguishing in both theory and practice between religious authority and political authority, *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, was in fact a Christian accomplishment, which in turn drew on ancient Jewish convictions about the dangers inherent in the idolatry of the political. Without question, both the European wars of religion and the Enlightenment played crucial roles in creating the modern political forms by which we acknowledge the distinction between religious and political authority. But the arguments for such a distinction had been made long before, and in explicitly theological terms, by Augustine, Aquinas, and many others standing in the biblical tradition.\*

\* This may be the place to note another large lacuna in *The Stillborn God*. Toward the beginning of the book, Lilla observes that “readers will notice the absence of modern Catholic thinkers from this study. . . . Telling the Catholic story would require another book.” But writing any part of the history of the Western debate over religion and politics without a serious wrestling with Catholic sources is a bit like writing the history of baseball without mentioning the National League. Perhaps the greatest challenge this presents to Lilla’s Hobbes-centered thesis is this: modern Catholic social doctrine, from the late-19th century to the present, provides a powerful argument on behalf of pluralism, religious freedom, civility, tolerance, and the rule of law, and is marked by a notable modesty in applying divine warrants to prudential judgments. All this, without any Great Separation and its unsustainable sundering of human life and human consciousness.

AND TODAY? Lilla's *The Stillborn God* avoids direct commentary on the present state of the religion-and-politics argument in America, which is sure to be a factor in the 2008 campaign. But Lilla was not so reticent in the *New York Times Magazine* summary of his book, and in what amounted to a throwaway line he showed rather more of his political hand. Acknowledging the "utterly exceptional" fact that, in America, deep differences over a host of bitterly contested issues are settled peaceably and legally, he attributes this exceptionalism to the happy combination of "a strong constitutional structure and various lucky breaks." Evidently it is the latter that most impress him. "It's a miracle," he concludes.

But it is not a miracle, and it never was. It was, and is, an accomplishment. And no matter how we weigh the various influences—some manifestly secular, others clearly religious—that shaped the religion clause of the First Amendment and the culture that crafted it, accepted it, and lived its provisions, it is a simple demographic fact that respect for religious freedom and commitment to religious toleration are, in the main, a religious accomplishment in the United States today. How could it be otherwise, given the vibrant, confusing, sometimes maddening, but impossible-to-ignore religiosity of the American people? Can Lilla really believe that the social, cultural, and moral consensus that keeps America from reprising the wars of religion is based on a national fondness for Thomas Hobbes?

The overwhelming majority of Americans accept the truly great separation—not the separation of religion and public life but the separation of religious authority and political authority—because they believe themselves religiously obliged to do so, and because enough remains of the old natural-law grammar and vocabulary for us to conduct the debate over the "oughts" of public life in a genuinely ecumenical and interreligious fashion, rather than by playing denominational trump cards or by claiming direct guidance from divine revelation.

There is another issue here that Lilla's "miracle" does not encompass and his book does not address. That is the issue of *how* we defend what is ours, and what is right. By what warrant, today, do we defend the American commitment to religious freedom,

civility in public life, and tolerance of those with whom we disagree? Through the pragmatic or utilitarian argument that it is just less messy to be tolerant and civil? That will not hold up for long under pressure; moreover, it risks making perilous concessions to those, like the Islamists of Europe, who would help themselves to the benefits of Western tolerance in pursuit of intolerant ends.\* Then by a tacit agreement, perhaps to be enforced by the Supreme Court, that religiously-grounded public moral argument is out of bounds in the public square? That may work in certain Manhattan zip codes, but not in most of America, where any such maneuver would rightly be regarded as profoundly undemocratic.

However ironic it may seem to Lilla, Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists who believe that God wants them to be tolerant of, and civil to, people who have a different idea, or no idea, of what God wants have a thicker, personally more demanding, and publicly more resilient set of arguments in defense of religious freedom and the civil society than do the pragmatists and utilitarians. So do those Catholics who take seriously the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II that religious freedom is the first of human rights—a claim the Catholic Church argues on genuinely public, not sectarian, grounds. There is no miracle here. But there is political theology at work, and at work in defense of the democratic common good.

Mark Lilla wants his Hobbes without the English philosopher's dark view of man. Rémi Brague, I suspect, knows that there is no such thing as Hobbes Lite, and that so thoroughly grim a view of the human condition runs the very real risk of underwriting an ignoble and ultimately vicious politics. There is a sense, then, in which the debate over religion and politics is a tale of two Thomases, Hobbes and Aquinas, with their deeply divergent views of human nature and the human prospect, and thus of politics and its pitfalls and its possibilities. One cannot imagine a more consequential debate for the future of democratic freedom in America, throughout the West, or in the intellectual and cultural struggle between the West and its enemies.

\* See my article, "Europe's Two Culture Wars," in COMMENTARY, May 2006.